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Officials link Haig to plots to kill Castro

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WASHINGTON — Secretary of State-designate Alexander M. Haig Jr. was involved in government plots to murder Fidel Castro in the mid-1960s, according to diplomatic and military officials who knew about the assassination plans.

At the time, Haig, a lieutenant colonel, was assigned to Joseph A. Califano Jr., a key civilian aide to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.

The News Journal has learned that Haig helped keep Cuban nationalist leaders informed of the efforts to kill Castro and coordinated information about the progress of the plots between the White House, the Defense Department and the CIA.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday started questioning Haig about his role as chief of staff to former President Nixon. The questioning was to involve not only the Watergate affair but also White House-directed foreign intervention kept secret from the Department of State, including involvement in Chile.

Not listed in the areas Democrats planned to question Haig was his involvement in plots to assassinate Fidel Castro.

The News Journal pieced together the story of Haig's involvement from officials of the Lyndon Johnson administration and from interviews with current intelligence officials aware of Haig's activities at the time.

A senior National Security Agency official told the News Journal that "one of the great secrets yet to emerge is who made up the team that plotted the murders of foreign leaders." You will find Al Haig's name on that list. While it was true he was just a functionary at the time, he had to do this dirty work to pay his dues.

secretary, said that the general "probably will not be able to comment on your story because he will be preparing for the Senate hearings."

Several calls to Califano's office for comment on the story were ignored. Califano's secretary said that the former cabinet officer was "unavailable" in meetings each time a reporter called.

Reagan transition spokesman Robin Gray said the president-elect would have no comment on the story.

Both Califano and Haig served later administrations in top posts. Haig, in addition to his work in the Nixon White House, became supreme NATO commander. Califano was secretary of health, education and welfare in the Carter administration. He is one of Washington's most influential lawyers and represents Haig.

One Democratic senator, who served on the committee that looked into the assassination attempts, predicted Haig would not be questioned about his role. "What in the hell do we get out exposing to the world that Al Haig help run Murder Inc. for two Democratic regimes? No way," said the senator who asked not to be identified.

Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware, one of the key Democrats questioning Haig in the current confirmation hearings, also said through a spokesman that he would not ask Haig about his role with Califano in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

The National Security Agency official said, "It should be obvious why Haig wants Califano as his lawyer. You will never see two closer men and it would be hard for anyone to ask Califano what Haig did since he can point to attorney-client privilege."

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special assistant to the secretary and deputy secretary of defense. Officially, Haig was assigned the police planning for the secretary of defense for Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Latin America, as well as liaison with the White House.

The 1975 Church Committee Report on Assassinations of Foreign Leaders details numerous plots against Castro that were conducted in a joint effort by the U.S. military, the CIA and mob hitmen. They recruited would-be assassins from the Cuban refugee community in Miami beginning in 1960.

Asked why Haig's name didn't show up in the Church Committee report, a member of the committee said, "He was a very low-level operative. Please remember there was a political problem with that investigation, we were Democrats looking at Democrats."

One Marine officer who worked with Haig on the project told the News Journal, "There were no direct written orders. Everything we did was done with a wink and a nod. The goal was to murder Fidel. There was one attempt after the other."

The officer, now a top official in the Defense Intelligence Agency, said, "Califano and Haig worked hand in hand in keeping the nationalists from the Cuban Brigade happy. They even checked out potential members for hit teams with older members of the Cuban Brigade," the expatriate group involved in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

He recalled that Haig would frequently talk to members of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion party to try to dissuade them from conducting unauthorized raids. "He would tell them that Castro was going to be killed," the former Haig colleague said.

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